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AUTHOR Fishman, Daniel B.
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ABSTRACT

Individual program evaluation studies have the potential to accumulate of very valuable knowledge and practical wisdom. Drawing on "The Case for Pragmatic Psychology" (D. Fishman, 1999), this paper contends that much of this wisdom is being thrown away because of the positivist paradigm used in determining which knowledge should be archived through publication and which should be discarded. It is suggested that a way of retaining the wisdom of individual evaluation studies is to implement a new "pragmatic psychology" paradigm within which individual program evaluations are documented in peer reviewed, systematic case studies that are electronically published in searchable, cumulative databases. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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Are We Throwing Away Our Wisdom? Pragmatic Psychology's Argument for Organizing Program Evaluation Studies into Core Knowledge Databases*

Daniel B. Fishman, Rutgers University, 11-6-99

D. Fishman

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Abstract

Individual program evaluation studies have the potential to accumulate very valuable knowledge and practical wisdom. Based upon the author's recent book, *The Case for Pragmatic Psychology* (Fishman, 1999), this paper contends that we are presently throwing away much of this wisdom because of the positivist paradigm we use in determining which knowledge should be archived through publication and which should be discarded. The paper further argues that a way of retaining the wisdom of our individual evaluation studies is to implement a new, "pragmatic psychology" paradigm, within which individual program evaluations are documented in peer reviewed, systematic case studies that are electronically published in searchable, cumulative databases.

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Ah, Success!

Consider a hypothetical example coming out of the recent, tragic shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and the national concern about violence presentation programs in the schools. Suppose there is a "Reach Out High School" that is in a predominantly white suburban section of a Rocky Mountain city that shares some of the larger gun culture that is found in other Western states like Colorado. Also suppose that the types of students attending Reach Out High are essentially the same as those who attend the other high school that serves the same geographic area -- which I will call "Traditional High School."

Suppose I conduct an in-depth program evaluation of Reach Out High's and of Traditional High's violence prevention programs encompassing both (a) an ethnographic-style, qualitative study, and (b) a series of quantitative measures, including number and severity of incidents involving suicidal or homicidal violence, number of disciplinary incidents, academic achievement, attendance rates, ratings by teachers of school safety and staff morale, and ratings by students and parents about the safety and overall satisfaction within the school.

And suppose that in my evaluation I find very clear-cut evidence -- both qualitative and quantitative -- that violence prevention, achievement, and morale in Reach Out High is dramatically better than that in Traditional High. This holds true across the variety of measures and factors I assessed. My evidence is particularly strong in that the Reach Out

High results are impressive both in absolute terms, on their own, and comparatively, in terms of showing a dramatic superiority over those of Traditional High.

Positivism and Case Studies Don't Mix.

The staff, board, and parents of Reach Out High will most probably be avid consumers of my results. But what about others in the program evaluation profession? Or professional educators? How will they obtain systematic, professional knowledge about the successful violence prevention program?

The usual way one would think results are disseminated is through the published program evaluation literature. What would be required for my evaluation to be published? While program evaluation is from one perspective a strongly applied field, at the present time it continues to be dominated by positivist social science, the "received view" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Greene, 1994). This paradigm searches for general knowledge. This means that when it comes to publication, the basic unit of knowledge is the experimental or quasi-experimental study that tests theoretical hypotheses across groups of subjects (Fishman, 1999). When this paradigm is brought to bear in the area of program evaluation, the result is a set of publication criteria that emphasize studies with themes like: (a) confirmation of a theory of social causation, (b) confirmation of a theory of social program functioning, (c) development of a new theory of program evaluation, or (d) development of a new methodological set of program evaluation procedures.

Back to my particular study results. On one hand, the results would seem to be of great practical value and relevance for other schools with similar types of students. On the other hand, due to present publication policies -- and the positivist paradigm upon which

they're based -- all these results will be basically lost to the profession and to the future. This is because the value of my program results is not related to theory-testing or an innovative methodology per se.

Rather, the value of my study is related to the results that I found: the documentation of an individual school with an outstandingly effective violence prevention program, that is, documentation of a school that works (Fishman, 1999). Of course, maybe I can obtain publication for my study because of the unique situation created by all the national publicity over the Colorado shooting. But generally, there are no publication outlets for these types of program evaluations.

Now think of all the other similar evaluation studies that are in essence lost to the published knowledge base of our field. From the perspective of "pragmatic psychology," this is a terrible waste (Fishman, 1999).

Needed: A Good Construction Company

What I'm calling "pragmatic psychology" is one of a variety of alternatives that today challenge the dominant positivist epistemology. Positivism emphasizes the search for general, objective knowledge through experimental theory-testing in laboratory-like settings. The challenges to positivism have grown at an increasing rate in recent years. These challenges go under a variety of names, such as "postmodernism," "social constructionism," "cultural criticism," "hermeneutics," and "qualitative research" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). I use the term "social constructionism" to encompass them all.

While there are important differences among these frameworks, they all contrast themselves to positivism. They assume that reality is, to a large extent, "constructed" or

"invented" by individuals and groups. This construction takes place as a function of particular personal beliefs and historical, cultural, and social context. Thus "social constructionism" argues against positivism's claim to achieve fundamental, objective, general knowledge about the world through the natural science method. Rather, the social constructionist contends that such knowledge is always limited by the subjective and cultural context of the knower. And so the "eternal" truths promised by natural science are limited to particular cultural, historical, and social perspectives and contexts (Fishman, 1999; Gergen, 1985).

Getting Down To Cases

In line with the tenets of social constructionism, pragmatic psychology views practical knowledge-in-context as crucial to its value. More specifically, in pragmatic psychology this knowledge-in-context consists of the systematic case study of individual human service programs. The research focus in a pragmatic study, then, is not upon the testing of a general theory. Rather, it is upon the condition of one or more particular clients -- be they an individual, group, organization, or community – in a particular program. The focus is on first, what the client's presenting problems and associated goals are at the beginning of the program, and second, whether during the course of the program, the client is helped to achieve these goals. So, within pragmatic psychology, case studies of particular programs constitute the knowledge foundation of present program planning and evaluation (Fishman, 1999).

From Single Case to Database

The pragmatic case study actually draws from both the positivist, natural science and social constructionist traditions. More particularly, it combines (a) standardized, quantitative, "performance indicator" measures of presenting problems and outcomes, associated with the positivist tradition (e.g., Rossi & Freeman, 1999); and (b) qualitatively elaborated case formulations and process descriptions, associated with the social constructionist tradition (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Crucially, the pragmatic case study addresses what might be called the "idiographic" problem -- the single case study's lack of generalizability of its programmatic and evaluative knowledge because of its N of 1. The pragmatic case study method calls for organizing case studies of programs with similar target goals into computerized databases (Fishman, 1999).

For example, consider a shelter program for the homeless in a very large city like New York, or a violence prevention program in a high school like Reach Out, discussed above. A write-up of either such a case is limited by the number of case situations in the future to which it will particularly apply. This is because large contextual differences can occur between this case and any other case that is randomly drawn out of a heterogeneous case pool. However, as cases in the database grow, they begin to sample a wide variety of contextually different situations in which the target problem can occur. So, as the number of cases in the database rise, the probability increases that there exist specific cases in the database that are particularly relevant to an ongoing target case.

In order to decide whether a particular completed case will generalize to an ongoing target case, it is necessary to have a detailed, qualitative, "thick" description of the conditions and context of the completed case. A good model for pragmatic psychology in

this regard is judicial law (Bromley, 1986). The basic unit in judicial law's knowledge base is the individual case. Thick description in the case includes transcripts of everything that was said and presented during the case, the judge's or jury's decision and the rationale for that decision, and all similar documents from any appeals associated with the case. The overall process in a judicial case is to view the unique constellation of the case's facts in the context of a particular legal conceptual framework. This legal conceptual framework is defined in most U.S. law by both deductive, legislated principles and inductive, English common law principles. The parallels to this legal framework in a case study of a human service program are positivistically derived social science theory and grounded social science theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), respectively. Both of these provide the conceptual base for developing a human service program and should be open to change and revision based upon case results.

There's Gold in Them Thar Databases

The type of reasoning employed to find features from past cases that are relevant to present cases -- "learning from experience" -- has been incorporated into a branch of artificial intelligence called "case-based reasoning" (Gentner & Holyoak, 1997; Kolodner, 1997). And this field provides a paradigm for developing the "single case to database" concept. As in other computer databases, each case would be categorized in various ways, creating the capacity to search for and access particular types of cases.

A practicing planner or evaluator, working with the problems, goals, and contexts of a particular program, could then access those case studies of other programs that best matched the target situation. Once found, these cases could provide guidance to the planner or evaluator in addressing their present target situation. This is similar to calling upon your

past experience to deal with a present situation. Or, consulting with colleagues about their experience.

The difference is that the knowledge in the database would be more systematic and clearly thought through, since it would be professionally written out. You would also have the advantage of consulting with much larger groups of professionals, including people you've never met. In short, the database would magnify the breadth and efficiency of the professional networking process (Fishman, 1999).

In addition to evaluation practitioners, researchers and theorists in the field could conduct comparative analyses across specific types of cases. These analyses could yield pragmatically focused generalizations about what intervention factors are associated with accomplishing certain types of goals in specific kinds of case situations, and also could contribute to grounded theory development. Since the full case study would be available, each factor and theoretical possibility would be explored in the context of the total service program. In other words, the exploration of a specific intervention factor would be embedded within the reality of the total intervention process, including the myriad of other variables of potential interest and relevance.

Throughout, evaluation would be a crucial component of each case study in determining its outcome, in determining whether the case study is to be viewed as a model for other programs or as an object lesson in pitfalls to be avoided.

The Nuts and Bolts of Rigor.

For program evaluation case studies to merit publication, they must be systematic and rigorous in method. In *The Case for Pragmatic Psychology*, I propose an initial place

to start for such a method. My proposal integrates work drawn from the fields of traditional psychometrics, program evaluation, qualitative research, and community psychology to develop a working set of general guidelines for such a methodology that encompasses systematic case studies of any type of human service program. These guidelines are laid out in terms of the typical organization and content of a traditional group research study write-up: introduction, method, results, and discussion. For comparison, parallel items are included for the positivist group study and the ethnographic, hermeneutically focused case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This comparison illustrates that the pragmatic paradigm is integrative, drawing methodological concepts and procedures from each of these other two paradigms. While space does not allow a full description of the guidelines, Table 1 presents a very brief summary of the positivist and pragmatic paradigms.

As can be seen in Table 1, a pragmatic case study, or "PCS," begins in the Introduction with a focus on client problems to be solved. The program's initial guiding theoretical framework for conceptualizing the problems, generating goals for change, and creating strategies for attaining the goals is called the program's "guiding conception." In content, this guiding conception is typically both molecular and holistic, systems-oriented and organic, and inclusive of a large number of variables..

In the Method section, the PCS describes and discusses a number of issues concerning the case setting, such as the rationale for choosing the case study, the boundaries of the case, a description of the program's services, and a description of the qualitative and quantitative measures to assess program process and client goal attainment. In addition are methodological controls to deal with first, issues parallel to those in a positivist study, such as construct validity, internal validity, and reliability; and second,

issues parallel to those in a hermeneutic study, such as the logical adequacy of grounded theory that might emerge from the study, the credibility of process descriptions, and "transferability," that is providing a "thick" description from which generalizability can be derived by induction.

Next is the Results section that outlines the quantitative results relevant to program impact, and the qualitative results relevant to program process, including any grounded theory that might emerge from the study.

Finally, in the Discussion section, there is practical application to other individual cases, and implications for confirming the general usefulness of the guiding conceptions in the study, including implications for grounded theory development.

Reinventing the Wheel: A Journal for Many Reasons

In light of the above, I propose that an ideal way of pilot-testing the pragmatic psychology paradigm would be to create a new, electronic, peer-reviewed "Journal of Pragmatic Case Studies." The journal would be structured like a wheel. The hub would consist of papers that address philosophical, theoretical, methodological, logistical, economic, political, and ethical issues in the development of insightful and useful, systematic case studies. Sample issues might include the epistemological basis of case studies; the practical problems of retaining as much context as possible while protecting confidentiality in a case study; and the refinement and improvement of methodological standards for guiding the peer-reviewed evaluation of case study manuscripts.

The spokes of the wheel would consist of particular databases of case studies, with each database focusing on human service programs aimed at a common goal, such as

preventing school violence, facilitating successful transition from welfare to work, reducing recidivism in juvenile offenders, or reducing dislocation caused by factory closings. Multiple spokes are necessary because, on one hand, there is a need for focus within a group of case studies to enhance generalization to other case situations of the same type. On the other hand, there is a need for many areas to be included in the journal to demonstrate the generality of the case study method to the evaluation of all types of human service programs.

Organizationally, one or more editors-in-chief and an advisory board in charge of the whole venture would closely supervise the journal's hub area. Subject area editors would be appointed to head up each spoke. This arrangement would allow for an overarching unity to the journal, while accommodating the level of specialty needed in particular areas. This unity would include a common set of guidelines for what defines an acceptable pragmatic case study in terms of epistemological grounding and methodological rigor.

It is important to note that a "Journal of Pragmatic Case Studies" could virtually incorporate into its databases case studies already published in other program evaluation journals, such as *Evaluation and Program Planning*. All that is needed is a common set of peer-reviewed methodological guidelines among the journals included in the virtual case study databases.

Ultimately, the proposed "Journal of Pragmatic Case Studies" could provide a vehicle for judging the pragmatic case study method on its practical results, that is, on whether the existence of databases of systematic case studies would in fact help to improve the performance of social service programs across the spectrum of human service needs.

The Winner Is...

In sum, I'm arguing that the development of pragmatic case study databases has four major beneficiaries.

First, it provides recognition for the work of professional evaluators by offering a publication outlet that directly parallels what is actually done in practice.

Second, it creates a whole new body of practical, "expert consultation" knowledge, for both evaluation practitioners and researchers alike.

Third, it provides a resource for the development of grounded theory with two crucial characteristics: it takes into account the epistemological limits of our socially constructed world, and it is guided by the practical need to address today's pressing psychosocial problems.

Finally, pragmatic psychology's promotion of rigorously documented case studies of programs that work should be welcomed by a public hungry for promising news about our capacity to address societal problems.

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TABLE 1. TYPICAL ORGANIZATION & CONTENT OF A RESEARCH REPORT IN THREE PARADIGMS

Abstracted from Fishman, D.B. (1999). *The case for pragmatic psychology*. New York: NYU Press, pp. 156-163.

Section of Article	**Positivist Group Study Paradigm**	**Pragmatic Case Study Paradigm**	**Hermeneutic Case Study Paradigm** (derived from the work of Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba)
INTRODUCTION:			
purpose of the study	To test a theory.	To solve client problems.	To explore a conceptual problem, to evaluate a program, or to explore a policy option.
type of conceptualization employed	In content, the theory to be tested is typically molecular, mechanistic, and limited to a few variables.	In content, the guiding conception for addressing the client's problems is typically both molecular and holistic, systems-oriented and organic, and inclusive of a large number of variables.	Theory emerges during the study and is typically holistic, systems-oriented and organic, inclusive of a large number of variables, and negotiated with the research participants.
METHOD:			
important variables to be considered	Settings. Measures. Procedures for theory-testing.	Case context. Rationale for choosing the case study. Case boundaries and relation to other cases. Program description. Stakeholder values and goals. Qualitative measures to assess program process. Quantitative measures to assess client goal-attainment.	Case context. Rationale for choosing the case study. Case boundaries and relation to other cases. Program description. Stakeholder values and goals. Qualitative measures employing the researcher in a participant observer role as a "human instrument."
purpose of study design	To ensure logical adequacy of theory testing.	To ensure logical adequacy of assessing program outcome and process, including the adequacy of relevant grounded theory emerging from the study.	To ensure logical adequacy of the grounded theory emerging from the study.
construct validity	Validity of the study's measures in operationalizing the study's theoretical variables.	Reasonableness, logical coherence, and sociopolitical fairness of the performance indicators that are used to reflect a program's process and the goals of its stakeholders.	Not applicable.
validity within the study	"Internal validity" of the *causal* processes within the study	"Internal validity" of the *functional* processes within the study.	Not applicable

TABLE 1: CONTINUED

Section of Article	**Positivist Group Study Paradigm**	**Pragmatic Case Study Paradigm**	**Hermeneutic Case Study Paradigm** (derived from the work of Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba)
METHOD (CONT.)			
Credibility	Not applicable.	Convincing logic and reasonableness relating the components of the program studied – guiding conception, assessment, formulation, action, evaluation, and feedback.	Establishing isomorphism between the constructed realities of case respondents and the reconstructions attributed to them.
Applicability to other sites	"External validity" – generalizing from sample characteristics by deduction.	"Transferability" – providing a "thick" description from which generalizability can be derived by induction.	"Transferability" – providing a "thick" description from which generalizability can be derived by induction.
Reliability	Showing repeatability of the measurement process.	Showing repeatability of the measurement process.	Not Applicable.
Dependability	Not applicable.	Establishing that the process of the study can be reconstructed by a research auditor.	Establishing that the process of the study can be reconstructed by a research auditor.
Researcher objectivity	Establishing a researcher's "value neutrality" and the lack of "experimenter bias."	Establishing procedures for reducing the impact of the researcher's values and conceptual preferences.	Not applicable.
Confirmability	Not applicable.	Assuring that data, interpretation, and outcomes in the research are rooted in contexts and persons of the case apart from the researcher.	Assuring that data, interpretation, and outcomes in the research are rooted in contexts and persons of the case apart from the researcher.
RESULTS:	Presenting quantitative results relevant to theory testing.	Presenting quantitative results relevant to program impact, and qualitative results relevant to program process, including relevant grounded theory that emerges from the study.	Summarizing the "grounded theory" that emerges from the researcher's participant observation role.
DISCUSSION:	Implications for general, nomothetic theory.	Practical application to other individual cases, and implications for confirming the general usefulness of the original guiding conception of the program, including implications for grounded theory development.	Idiographic lessons to be learned, both about grounded theory and about empowering stakeholders.